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This article focuses on the structural and semantic analysis of the sentences containing the pronoun "it" as a formal object. Although at first sight "it" seems to have no meaning whatsoever, it actually plays an important role in the semantic structure of the sentence. The formal object "it" changes the subcategorical meaning of a polyfunctional verb and frequently its semantics. "It" blocks up the objective valency of the verb, often changing its meaning and transforming it into an intransitive verb. (Author/VWL)

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THE SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF SENTENCES WITH A POSITION-FILLER "it" AS A FORMAL OBJECT

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The present article deals with the structural and semantic analysis of the sentences containing the pronoun *it* as a formal object. Although at first sight *it* seems to have no meaning whatsoever, it actually plays an important role in the semantic structure of the sentence. The formal object *it* changes the subcategorial meaning of a polyfunctional verb and frequently its semantics. *It* blocks up the objective valency of the verb, often changing its meaning and transforming it into an intransitive verb.

Keywords: formal "it", formal object, formal subject, position-filler "it", pleonastic "it"

The pronoun *it* used as the formal subject and the formal object of the sentence is a very interesting field of research. *It* plays an important role in the syntactic and semantic structure of the sentence. More than 5000 examples from different literary sources were analysed, in which the pronoun *it* as a formal subject and object. In this article an attempt will be made to present some of the results of this study. The research resulted in a classification of the verbs which were used in the constructions with the pronoun *it* as a formal object. Before proceeding to the analysis of the use of the pronoun *it* as a formal object, let us give a short overview of the use of this pronoun as a subject.

1 THE USE OF THE PRONOUN *IT* AS THE FORMAL SUBJECT

The pronoun *it* may have the force of a purely grammatical formal element of the sentence, devoid of any lexical meaning. According to Haegeman (1994: 62) *it* plays no role in the semantic make-up of the sentence and its presence is required simply for some structural reasons. The pronoun *it* acts

as a mere slot-filler, a dummy pronoun without semantic contribution to the sentence; it is a place-holder for the otherwise unfilled subject position.

The formal subject expressed by *it* is found in two patterns:

1) those with *impersonal it*
2) those with *introductory (anticipatory) it*

Impersonal it is used in sentences describing various states of nature, or things in general, or characteristics of the environment, or denoting time, distance, or measurement, e.g.

It freezes.
It seems that he was right.
It turned out that she was wrong.

In last two sentences the clause cannot fill the linear position of the subject, i.e. *It seems that he was right* cannot be transformed into **That he was right seems.*

Because the formal impersonal *it* always precedes impersonal verbs or predicatives with a link-verb (*it rains, it seems so, it is evening*) and no other subject is possible with these, *it* becomes a marker, indicating the impersonal status of the sentence and the verb. Being a marker it can change the subcategorial meaning of any polyfunctional verb by blocking up its subjective valency, as in *It appears that he has been ill.*

It is considered as introductory (or anticipatory) if it introduces the notional subject expressed by an infinitive, a gerund, an infinitive/gerundial phrase, a predicative complex, or a clause.

E.g. *It is impossible that he would have done so.*

The sentence thus contains two subjects: the formal (introductory) *it* and the notional subject expressed by a clause. The terms *pleonastic it* and *extra it* are also used. In general it is considered better style if the real subject is a long one, as it enables the longest part of the sentence to stand at the end (Bywater 1997: 73). This usage should not, however, be confused with the term "null subject" which has no overt phonetic form. (Radford 1997: 518)

As the aim of this article is to analyse the use of the pronoun *it* as a formal object, the problem of the use of *it* as a subject is not further discussed..

2 THE USE OF THE PRONOUN *IT* AS THE FORMAL OBJECT

Apart from using the pronoun *it* (sometimes referred to as a position-filler) in the function of a formal subject, it also functions as a formal object followed by an adjective or a noun which is modified by an infinitive phrase, an *ing*-form phrase or a clause, e.g.

> ...Mrs Gartin would have thought it silly, affected and unhealthy to have flowers in her bedroom.(Veil 1981: 230)

> *We may take it that the shortest way for a tyrant to get rid of troublesome championship of liberty is to raise...* (Apple 1975: 19)

The sentence thus has two objects: the formal object *it* and a notional object, which is a clause. The formal object *it* may be either a direct object (*I take it that everything is O.K.*) , or an indirect non-recipient object (*She objected to it that her husband should go and fetch them from the station).*

This use is not only common in Modern English, but was also used in Old, Middle and Early Modern English period, especially in such constructions as: V + it + Adj (participle). The linguists interpreted these constructions on a formal syntactical level. Onions (1929: 143) thinks that the introduction of a formal *it* is necessary because the subordinate clause or infinitive could not be considered as objects after certain verbs without the support of *it*.

In order to find out the semantic and structural role of *it*, it is necessary to study the verbs that are used with the formal *it* as the formal object.

3 VERBS THAT ARE USED WITH THE FORMAL *IT* AS THE FORMAL OBJECT

1. The first group consists of the transitive verbs expressing psychological or mental activity and some verbs denoting speaking activity, expressing opinion, suggestion, doubt, belief, etc.:

> acknowledge, believe, claim, conceive, consider, count, declare, deem, doubt, esteem, expect, express, fancy, find, guess, hold, imagine, judge, know, look, mean, prove, regard, repeat, show, suppose, take, think, understand

The characteristic structural schemes for these verbs are the following:

1) S + V + it + Adj. + (for N (pr)) + INF/Cl/Gerund
2) S + V + it + INF/Cl/Gerund

The Bristol owners consider it most unwise for John Skimerhorn to be retained as manager while you and your husband, major Stockholder reside on the premises with full ability to run the operation. (Michener 1975: 851)

... and such was the insecurity of the period as to render it probable that delay might be explained by some depredation of the outlaws... (Scott 1962: 52)

The constructions where these verbs are used have a difficult semantic structure. In the sentence: *I consider it probable that Josephine had been hiding something there,...* (Crooked 1966: 146) the part *it probable that Josephine had been hiding something there* has the following semantic structure: impersonal part *it probable* and a part *that Josephine had been hiding something there.* Further complication of the semantic structure is caused by the fact that modal (impersonal) + dictum are incorporated into the part which is expressed at the surface level with the help of *I consider*, i.e. incorporated into another modal frame. The modal frame with *it* will be called the frame of the first order (*it probable that Josephine had been hiding something there*), whereas the external modal frame *I consider* will be the modal frame of the second order, having its own subject and predicate (I consider). The modal character of the frame of the second order is determined, besides the semantics of the verbs expressing mental activity, by the presence of non-meaningful *it* in the position of an object on a syntactic level (I consider it probable). Such structures as *They believe such stories* and *They believe it possible...*, represent different types of nomination. In the first example, the sentence *They believe such stories* is supported by a real fact (referent nomination). In the second instance there is a non-referent, predicate nomination, for *They believe*, without fully meaningful object, becomes a designation of the signification (notion). In this connection the semantic role of the part of the sentence represented at the surface level as a subject is changed: in sentences *They believe such stories; We consider such a possibility*, etc. the subject is an active person (agent); in the structures of *They believe it possible, We consider it probable*, however, the type of the subject is a source of perception (perceptive), i.e. the nomination has a non-referent character, denotes the fact belonging to comprehension.

The formal object to the verb of the main part of *it* at the surface level stands at the boundary of two modal (impersonal) frames and fulfils a difficult semantic role: on the one hand *it* indicates the release of the concretely directed object valency in the predicate of the modal frame of the second order *consider*, its non-directed, modal evaluative meaning being actualized by *it*; on the other hand, *it* indicates the release of the subject valence of the first order modal predicate – "probable", actualizing the impersonality within the whole structure *it probable*. Joining the two semantic structures into one indivisible whole, creates a special joint subject-object modus. At the syntactic level the intensification of the moduses is actualized in a complex way-by-way of hypostatis, i.e. by drawing the two non-mean-

ingful elements of two modal structures into one, and is realized by using the formal *it* in the position of a dependent subject member and the position of an object simultaneously. At the semantic level the formal object *it* also has a double function – it actualizes the agentlessness of the modus verb and forecasts incorporation of the modus part of the first order and the dictum part.

The formal *it* has partially retained the original pronoun nature with the expansion of referentness (designation of the situation as a whole, the so-called *unspecified it*): *I hate it when somebody answers that way.* (Salinger 1968: 39)

Although at first sight the pronoun *it* in such a sentence seems to have no meaning whatsoever, it actually plays an important role in the general semantic structure of the sntence. The use of the formal *it* in the construction influences the categorial meaning of the verb. If we omit it, not only the structure of the sentence will be abnormal, but also the meaning of the verb will change.

cf. *I believe you.* – *I believe it to be the only way out.*
I take this book. – *I take it you have a plan.*

Let us discuss one more example. In the sentence *I'm finding it difficult enough to interest people in the future as it is ...* (Spoon 1976: 117) the infinitive *to interest people in the future* was considered in the traditional syntactic analysis to be the adverbial modifier of consequence, however, in the semantic analysis the role of this structural unit is much more important – this is the main proposition, around which two modal frames are situated. The evaluation belongs to the predicate *to interest people in the future*, which has no subject, but has only a subjectless proposition.

The following adjectives are used in such constructions: *absurd, advisable, appalling, appropriate, bad, befitting, blasphemous, brave, cheap, (in)conceivable, conductive, confusing, (in)convenient, criminal, dangerous, deplorable, desirable, difficult, (un)dignified, discreet, easy, essential, expedient, (in)explicable, foolish, (un)fortunate, good, grateful, hard, (un)healthy, (un)kind, lamentable, (il)logical, lonesome, (un)natural, (un)necessary, odd, (un)pleasant, (im)polite, (un)important, (im)possible, pretty, (im)probable, profitable, (im)proper, prudent, reposeful, ridiculous, (un)reasonable, (un)safe, threatening, (in)tolerable, valuable, (un)wise, etc.*

Consider, for example, the following example with the verb *"find"*:

I found it hard to understand this... (Mortimer1978: 151)

On the other hand, the following instances have been noted by the author. The transformation of *it* into the formal, meaningless element modifying the verb in the categorial and semantic senses, turning it into the evaluative verb, with its valence and the character of direction being changed. These instances

are of the greatest interest, for they reveal the functional parallelism of "it" + the object with the impersonal subject.

In sentences containing a verb with a meaningless "*it*" in the position of an object of the type *I take it you have a plan, Rod.* (Clarke 1978: 177), the principal proposition is designed into the subordinate part of a sentence – *you have a plan*, the semantic role of *it* is reduced to a merely neutralizing role: to neutralize the directed meaning of the verb-predicate and to actualize a new combinability. Thus, at the surface level, *it* has a role of the formal marker of a different combinability of the verb *take* (as a rule this verb in its primary meaning is not used with subordinate clauses). Since the directness at the subsequent structure designed as an immediate object of action is neutralized, what occurs is the reevaluation of the whole of the first part *I take it* into the evaluating part (the modus frame), with modifying the meaning of the verb with explicit perceptiveness "I" into the modal-evaluative verb. The subordinate part, besides its central semantic (informative) role of the principal proposition, also plays a certain role in the perception of the evaluative part.

The formal *it* used as an object blocks up the objective valency of the verb, often changing its meaning and transforming it into an intransitive verb, e.g. *I take it you must have tried the suburbs at one time*, where *I take it* means *I presume*.

As the impersonal pronoun *it* indicates only the new orientation and combinability of the verb-predicate, it may sometimes be omitted, in case these characteristics have been consolidated in the language firmly enough and become morphological properties of the above-mentioned verb.

On the other hand, the complication of the syntactic construction at the expense of introduction of *it*, enables the semantic structure of the utterance to become more complex, i.e. the conditions are created for the realization of the two modus frames as shown in the model of the constructions discussed earlier:

II I

/I take/it/to be possible/ + proposition in the form of any complement.

2. In case of the verb expressing volitional wish like *want, wish*, the construction with another semantic structure is formed. Let us have a look at a few examples:

I wish it to be seen that Sir Wycherly Wychecombe is desirous of making his will (Ellinger 1928:281)

The semantic structure of the sentence consists of the following components:

1) the predicate of the modal frame of the first order (usually Participle II or passive-infinitive)
2) the modal frame of the second order consists of the subject, but because of the absence of the object-denotate, the predicate lacks the meaning of transitivity (*I wish. He wanted)*

The syntactic structure with these verbs is the following:

S + V + it + INFpass + Cl
S + V + it + PartII + Cl

3. If the predicate of the modal construction of the second order is expressed with one of the verbs denoting mental processes, such as *see, hear, feel,* the syntactic structure is the following:

S + V + it + N + (for + Nadr) + INF
S + V + it + Adj. + (for + Nadr) + INF

But I felt it high time for me to leave the two ladies to themselves, so I took my leave. (Rain 1977: 322)

We feel it unwise to allow them to mix too freely with those not in their social class. (Holt 1967: 173)

4. A few causative verbs form a separate group: *keep, leave, let, make render.* The subject of these verbs denotes a real person. Evaluation actualizes in the propositional part:

I kept it a profound secret that in the privacy of my lodgings I was writing... (Cakes 1958: 167)

... too old-fashioned for words, he had made it clear already that he wanted to marry her. (Spoon 1976: 79)

Such structures are very common in newspaper style: *They have made it clear that they want to see no-strike agreements...*

The following adjectives and advebs are used as objective predicative parts: *advisable, agonizing, available, certain, clear, convenient, difficult, easy, embarrasing, evident, (in)evitable, hard, interesting, (il)legal, likely, (un)necessary, obvious, plain, (im)possible, precise, (im)probable, suitable, etc.*

5. Among the verbs with the formal position-filler *it* there is a group which expresses the strong emotional reaction: *blame, bother, confound, curse, damn, dash, hang, swear,* e.g. *damn it, hang it.*

Oh! Hang it! (Monkey 1976: 69)

6. There is another use of *it* as the position-filler: it can be attatched to transitive or intransitive verbs (*boss, bus, cab, court, dance, fool, hotel, inn, walk)* to convey a very vague idea of some kind of an object. It formally fills the position of the object but has no meaning of its own. The meaning of these verbs will change if these verbs are used with the pronoun *it*:

We can walk it in two hours.
We can walk in two hours.

The first sentence could be paraphrased as *We'll reach the destination in two hours,* whereas the second sentence could be paraphrased as *We are going for a walk in two hours.*

The use of the non-meaningful *it* as an actualizer of another categorial meaning, sometimes also the lexical meaning of the verb, in a number of cases contributes to its functioning as a word-building device, giving a certain modification to the original form. It is natural, therefore, that this way of functional and lexical modification has come to be widely used when forming verbs out of nouns by way of conversion, e.g.

We would sleep out on fine nights and hotel it, and pub it when it was wet. (Jespersen 1935: 156)

4 CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to analyse sentences with the pronoun *it* as a formal object. Although at first sight the pronoun *it* seems to have no meaning whatsoever, it plays an important role in the semantic structure of the sentence.

The conclusion to be drawn from what has been said above is that at the semantic level the position-filler *it* as a formal object plays a dual function – it actualizes the intransitivity of the predicate of the second order and impersonality of the modal predicate of the first order. Therefore, the formal object *it* changes the subcategorial meaning of a polyfunctional verb and often its semantics. The formal *it* blocks up the objective valency of the verb, often changing its meaning and transforming it into an intransitive verb.

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